

TESTIMONY  
OF

Johnny C. Barnes  
On Behalf Of  
The United States SweetPotato Council

General Farm Commodities and Risk Management Subcommittee  
of the

**House Agriculture Committee**

1301 Longworth Building

Washington, DC 20515

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Testimony Before the General Farm Commodities and Risk Management Subcommittee  
of the  
**HOUSE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE**  
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I want to thank you for allowing me to testify before the Subcommittee on the subject of crop insurance.

My name is Johnny Barnes of Spring Hope, North Carolina. I am part of a family owned and operated farm located in Nash County, North Carolina. Our farm is a diversified operation as we grow several different commodities. We have been growing sweetpotatoes for 50 years, and we currently grow approximately 3,600 acres.

According to the National Ag Statistics Service (NASS), sweetpotatoes have been commercially grown in the United States since the 1800's. The 1997 Census of Agriculture reports that sweetpotatoes are grown in some 23 different states. The top four states in production in 2002, ranked from one to four, were North Carolina, California, Mississippi and Louisiana. In 2002, NASS reported that nationally, sweetpotatoes were grown on 83,300 acres. Production was 1.2498 billion pounds with a crop value of \$213 million dollars. Sweetpotato production is very important to the rural communities in which they are grown.

Sweetpotatoes may be the most nutritious of all vegetables. They are a powerhouse of nutrition. According to USDA, they are an excellent source of beta-carotene (a precursor to Vitamin A), a good source of Vitamin C and potassium, a non-fat source of Vitamin E and they also contain other valuable nutrients such as Vitamin B6, Folate and fiber.

Sweetpotato producers need an effective risk management tool available to all growers which will provide a safety net against weather related disasters. The variability of the weather is the most important economic factor sweetpotato farmers encounter during a growing season. Hurricanes and tropical storms which affect the eastern and southern gulf states deliver torrential rains during the time when the sweetpotato crop is mature and ready for harvest. Because sweetpotatoes are a root crop, they cannot survive excessive moisture nor will they mature during prolonged dry conditions. (The east coast has just been relieved of drought conditions during 2003.) Crop insurance for all who choose to protect themselves against catastrophic loss is essential.

Prior to 1998, crop insurance for sweetpotato production and storage was not available. The current pilot programs started with the 1998 crop year. By including the current 2003 growing season, therefore, the current pilot program has been in effect for six seasons.

The pilot program currently operates in five different states and eight different counties, as follows:

Baldwin County, Alabama  
Merced County, California  
Avoyellas County, Morehouse County, and West Carroll County, Louisiana  
Columbus and Johnston County, North Carolina  
Horry County, South Carolina.

During the six year existence of the pilot, our growers and the North Carolina SweetPotato Commission have had a number of meetings with USDA's Risk Management Agency (RMA) to talk about crop insurance and to discuss the kind of program we wanted. Similarly, growers from other states and their state organizations have also had meetings with RMA.

In our meetings with RMA consultants, RMA staff and in our correspondence with RMA and Congressmen in Washington, sweetpotato growers and our Council have always made it clear that we want a crop insurance program for sweetpotatoes that is:

1. Market Neutral
2. Honest (No Fraud)
3. Practical
4. Affordable

The requirement that the program be market neutral is very, very important. However, as much as we have tried to communicate to RMA the need for market neutrality, sweetpotato growers are not convinced that RMA is hearing us.

To assure that the issue of market neutrality is included; our North Carolina growers have always asked that three requirements be included in any permanent crop insurance program for sweetpotatoes:

1. Producer must have a three-year history of production before obtaining coverage with acreage certified by FSA.
2. Producer is limited to insuring no more than 110 percent of his prior three year average of certified acreage. For example, if a grower's certified acreage over the past three years is 100 acres, then the most acreage that he could insure for the coming year would be 110 acres.
3. Producer must prove, or show, that unharvested acreage is destroyed prior to closing the claim.

Moreover, since the pilot program is now completing its sixth year of existence, US sweetpotato growers, through the efforts of THE UNITED STATES SWEET POTATO COUNCIL, are now asking that the pilot program become a permanent program and be made available to all sweetpotato growers in all counties in all states. We don't think it's fair for some growers to have had the program for six years, while the rest of us have to go without the safety net against disaster that crop insurance provides.

To give the Subcommittee an example of why we think it is so important to have market neutrality and to make it available to all growers, may I refer the Subcommittee to Table 1, below of my testimony.

Table 1. A comparison of sweetpotato acreage planted, acres harvested and net acres insured in Columbus County, North Carolina, 1998-2001.

Year	Acres Planted	Acres Harvested	Net Acres Insured
1998	1,455.00	1,355.00	1,582.00
1999	1,550.00	1,200.00	2,317.00
2000	1,700.00	1,400.00	4,011.00
2001	1,800.00	1,500.00	5,170.00
Four Year Total	6,505.00	5,455.00	13,080.00

Source: NCASS and [www.rma.usda.gov](http://www.rma.usda.gov)

Note: Acres planted and acres available only through 2001.

Columbus County, North Carolina was selected as one of the pilot counties when the program was implemented in 1998. Over the four year period, 1998 through 2001, the number of “net acres insured” each year exceeded the number of “acres harvested” and the number of “acres planted”. There is something wrong with this picture, and the figures in Table 1 imply there is a problem. Could it be that some growers are farming crop insurance rather than sweetpotatoes?

To end my testimony, US sweetpotato growers would very much like to have an effective risk management tool available to them. However, if a program cannot be devised that is market neutral, honest, practical and affordable; I would then recommend that the crop insurance program be dropped completely. Similarly, it is not fair for some growers to have access to the pilot program for six years, and thereby, create additional volume and competition for bonafide growers that have been growing sweetpotatoes for many, many years but do not have access to the benefits of the pilot program. Unless it is made available to all growers in 2004, again I would recommend that the crop insurance program be completely dropped.